‘PEOPLE BASICALLY WANT THEIR HANDS HELD THROUGH TWELVE ‘MULL OF KINTYRES”

…or so suspects **Radiohead**’s Jonny Greenwood, as he and fellow ’head boy Ed O’Brien reflect with *NME* on 12 mad months of bemused critical brickbats, unbridled public adulation and (ahem) no interviews.

Text: **James Oldham**
Photography: **Rankin**

It’s very Radiohead. Get off the train at Didcot Parkway and the first thing you see is a huge power station belching fumes into the slate-grey sky. For a band notoriously concerned with the oncoming destruction of the planet, how appropriate that they should have chosen to place their management offices here of all places.

Today *NME* is meeting up with the band’s two guitarists, Ed O’Brien and Jonny Greenwood, to discuss a year in which Radiohead finally released the follow-up to 1997’s ‘OK Computer’, an album widely regarded as the most critically-acclaimed of all time. That they did so with ‘Kid A’, a record of stealthy and slow-burning rock-electronica, made their return one of the most controversial of the year.

Hailed in some quarters as a deliberate and perverse act of commercial suicide, it immediately went to Number One on both sides of the Atlantic, despite the fact that the band insisted on no singles, no videos and an absolute minimum of press coverage. None of this stopped critics, including this correspondent, questioning Radiohead’s motives, especially when they announced that there would be another album in the spring of 2001 which was set to contain much of the more conventional material that they had showcased live throughout the year.

Ten minutes after arriving in Didcot, *NME* settles down in a room above the studio attached to Radiohead’s management offices and begins to put some of these issues to the ever-genial Ed and the rather more twitchy Jonny. Taking time out from putting the finishing touches to ‘Kid A”s as-yet-untitled successor, they’re in good spirits and are only too happy to discuss the highs and lows of what’s been an eventful year for Britain’s biggest group. So why not sit back as they talk you through it…

JANUARY-MAY 2000

The year began with a welter of speculation about Radiohead’s progress with their new album. Rumours circulated that they were finding it impossible to complete new material and that the recording sessions (which had taken place in three studios and three countries across Europe) were becoming disjointed and acrimonious. It later transpired that such stories were wide of the mark and the band simply had *too much* material.

On April 19, Thom Yorke posted a message on the band’s official website, declaring, “Yesterday we finished recording. I am free and happy and now I’m going for a walk in the park.” Finally, the follow-up to ‘OK Computer’ was imminent. When the tracklisting was announced, though, critics immediately decided that an experimental album was to be released first, with the ‘proper’ one following next year.

Ed: “This is the thing that’s going round. I read an interview with someone recently and they said, ‘I hear Radiohead have put out this wilfully perverse record first, but they’re going to release an album of knock-them-dead pop tunes next.’ It’s interesting that a lot of people this year have decided that there’s some kind of masterplan to what we do. They think we’re stuck away in the heart of the Oxford countryside plotting and scheming, and the reality of it is that a lot of what we do happens by chance.

“There weren’t any singles off ‘Kid A’, because there weren’t any singles on the record as far as we concerned. We didn’t do videos because there weren’t any singles. There’s no great mystique to it. You just try and bluff your way through it and do what feels right. Fortunately, we’ve got ourselves into a position where we can do that.”

At the same time, you weren’t comfortable with the acclaim surrounding ‘OK Computer’ and you did want to dampen down your media coverage.

Ed: “We just wanted to make a different kind of record. One of the big things was trying to dispel all the hype, which was something we never felt comfortable with or worthy of. We live in a ridiculous time where people in the entertainment business get stupid amounts of coverage for what they do. If we’d have been doing this 20 years ago, I’m sure we wouldn’t have got so much coverage. It’s just there’s this huge industry behind what we all do and it’s not something you feel necessarily comfortable with. You just have to try to work within that whole area without frying your brains up.”

Is that why Thom refused interviews?

Ed: “Not really. From his point of view, he just doesn’t like them. What people don’t understand is that he just doesn’t like the scrutiny he comes under when he’s interviewed. I think that’s fair enough. Why do you have to do it? You don’t.”

Jonny: “I think you have a duty to let people know what you’re up to and communicate with them if you expect them to have any interest in your music.”

Ed: “And he does that on his website. I mean, he’s got quite a legacy with the music press. I think in 1995 his face was on the cover of a magazine with the words: ‘Is this going to be the next rock’n’roll suicide?’ Why do you think he doesn’t want to talk to people? I think he’s got better things to do with his time. We haven’t cut ourselves off, because of our website. We correspond with people through that. That’s our outlet.”

People were already starting to say you were control freaks.

Jonny: “We’re just not interested in getting our faces on magazine covers.”

Ed: “It’s not like we make people sign contracts, like a lot of American bands do. I don’t think we’ve ever told people what they can and can’t ask.”

With hindsight, do you think you were successful in dampening down the hype? Or did you make it worse?

Jonny: “I think we fucked up how people got to hear the record. It should have been available earlier. It was tricky… If we’d have given it to people a month earlier, there still would have been reviews two days later.”

JUNE-JULY 2000

Before that storm broke, though, Radiohead undertook a sedate tour around the rim of the Mediterranean, prior to a return to England to play at the Royal Festival Hall as part of Scott Walker’s Meltdown Festival. At the end of June, a review of the band’s first show for 18 months in Arles’ Theatre Antique made the cover of *NME*. The new material was heralded as “intense, intriguing and enigmatic”. The band’s low-key re-entry to a waiting world was deemed a success.

Jonny: “I think we did those shows because we just wanted to be outdoors and warm.”

Ed: “We’d been stuck in studios for a year and a bit.”

Jonny: “It was kind of selfish, really, before we did the proper one *(tour)* in the autumn. It had been so long since we’d played.”

Ed: “We just wanted to ease our way back into it. By the end of touring ‘OK Computer’, things had got fairly grim, so we wanted to be mollycoddled. We played in venues that you couldn’t fail to be inspired by. Although, typical Radiohead, we arrive in the middle of the summer, there’s a downpour on the first night and the second night gets cancelled because the venue’s flooded.”

Were you nervous about how people were going to react to the new material?

Ed: “Of course. We were shitting it. A lot of the songs we’d never played live before. It was the first time we had songs on a record that had been completely constructed in the studio and had not been endlessly toured and rehearsed. We had to change the form of some of them to make sure they worked live, and on the whole I think they did.”

AUGUST-SEPTEMBER 2000

By this point, various sections of the media were beginning to hear ‘Kid A’ at controlled listening sessions throughout London. Not everyone thought this such a good idea, and at the start of September an *NME Banging On* column ranted about the band’s “uptight control freakery”.

Problems for Radiohead escalated as opinions on the album were immediately circulated by those who’d heard it. As ‘Kid A’ was so radically different from ‘OK Computer’ – and not the sort of record you can easily ‘get’ in one sitting – most of them were negative.

By the start of September, when the band ventured out on their British tour in their own sponsorship-free, 10,000-capacity big top, the knives started to come out. After the relaxed atmosphere of their summer shows, the first date in Newport took place in an altogether different climate – both critically and meteorologically. The band themselves were certainly more tense.

Ed: “It’s just a numbers thing. Instead of just having a small crew, you’ve suddenly got 50 or 60 people around. The weather was cold, and it was fairly grim. The tour in the summer was like a holiday where we played gigs. When we started the British tour we were just nervous, we wanted it to work. There was a lot more to fuck up on.

“If you ask any band, the difference between starting a tour in Britain or Europe is immense. You know that when you open up in the UK, there are always people who come along in a sceptical frame of mind, whereas in Europe it’s more like, ‘Thanks for coming’. It’s a good and bad thing but, as Brits, we’re very, very critical and we have this love of people fucking up. We do, it’s true…”

Your critics had become more vocal by this stage as well. People thought the £25 ticket price was too expensive.

Jonny: “That had nothing to do with *(lack of)* advertising. That was all to do with building a venue every night and not playing in a sports hall. That’s why it was expensive.”

Ed: “I argue that when you go to a Premiership football match, you’re often paying £28-30 a ticket. If you went to Arsenal, you probably couldn’t get in for £25. There you just get an hour and a half’s worth of entertainment but people do it week in and week out. We didn’t run at a profit on that tour. We just wanted to provide something different; a better experience than you’d have got in your Wembley Arenas or wherever. That cost us money.”

Jonny: “People concentrated on the lack of banners and advertising and that was just a by-product of having your own venue. We were never going to get obsessed by whether the beer tent had logos in it. The concept was what was worrying us.”

Ed: “We could have knocked out some shows at Wembley Arena, like a lot of bands do, for £17.50 a ticket, but you’re so far away you could be seeing anyone, The Beautiful South or whoever. It was the same when we went to France. Because of the rates of exchange we were the most expensive ticket in Paris. Yes, £25 is a lot of money, but that was the choice we made, and I’m sorry if people couldn’t afford it.”

Would you do it again?

Ed: “We’re looking into it… we’re definitely taking the tent to America.”

OCTOBER 2000 (PART ONE)

‘Kid A’ is finally released. In *NME*, at the end of September, a feature on the band describes its fuzzy electronic rush as “a lengthy and over-analysed mistake”. The actual review was kinder, giving it 7/10, but concluded by saying, “Radiohead have always been about something, be it the loathing of self or the human condition in general, and the ramifications thereof. Yet it seems in a desire to quash the rampant air of significance suffusing their every movement and utterance, they’ve rather sold short the essence of their art.”

Ed: “I don’t read interviews but I always read reviews. I thought *NME*’s review was really, really good and very fair. A lot of people obviously just hadn’t heard it enough and they just wanted to be first out of the box. It was that thing where one person writes a bad review and then the floodgates open. In the US, we got these amazing reviews, but I think that was just because people had had the record for longer.”

You were criticised for lurching arbitrarily towards electronica…

Jonny: “The subtext of it all was: why don’t you sound like you used to sound five years ago. Yes…”

People argued if you want to listen to this sort of music, why not just go and buy an Aphex Twin album?

Ed: “Well in that case, why listen to a Bowie album? Why not go to the sources that he was listening to? If you’re creating and doing something new, you’re absorbing influences. It’s that age-old thing of taking on new things and making them your own. You find your own path, and that’s what makes it interesting.”

People also thought the tracklisting was perverse, bearing in mind the songs that you’d been playing live.

Ed: “We’re the ones making the music, so we should be allowed to put out the

continues over

“IT’S AS IF PEOPLE WERE HOPING WE’D MAKE A RECORD THAT SOUNDED LIKE ALL THE PEOPLE WHO SOUND LIKE US. THAT WOULD HAVE JUST BEEN POINTLESS.” – JONNY GREENWOOD

"Imaging there's no Radiohead/It isn't hard to do...": *(l-r) Ed, Phil, Thom, Colin and Jonny*

continued from page 53

record we want. We wanted to make a different record and one that represented part of the time we were in the studio. It was a chance to make a very different record to anything we'd made before. That was all we were trying to do. 'OK Computer' was an extremely emotional record. 'Kid A' is a lot more controlled."

Jonny: "If we're getting a kicking for doing this, we should also be getting a kicking for ripping off Mingus and Alice Coltrane, people who we are equally stealing from. The difference is that they're not in fashion or aren't perceived as so cutting edge. No-one sat down and said, 'How can you so shamelessly take the texture of Alice Coltrane's second album and put it on one of your songs?'"

Ed: "These things take time. You have to pay your dues. We did our thing with 'songs' and we're still doing it, but that's not what we're interested in. We are interested in the sonic stuff. You have to start somewhere. To be scared of putting that stuff out is completely wrong, you've got to put it out.

"The interesting thing about bands and music is the way they develop. I think in a couple of albums' time, 'Kid A' will be seen as more important than it is now. It's another way of working, it's another methodology. That's what's interesting, and that's what was interesting about Bowie in the '70s or Lou Reed or whoever. Sometimes you have to just trust your instincts."

Jonny: "It's as though a lot of people were secretly hoping we'd make a record that sounded like all the people who sound like us. That would have just been pointless."

Ed: "What's been great is that a lot of musicians have come up to us and said they like elements on the record. That's what it's about."

OCTOBER 2000 (PART 2)

In America, meanwhile, Radiohead mania reached a tempestuous peak. The album entered the US charts at Number One, becoming the first British LP to do so since Prodigy's 'The Fat Of The Land' three years previously.

When tickets went on sale for their gig at New York's Roseland Ballroom, frenzy ensued – with fans camping out overnight in order to secure tickets. Ask them about it now, however, and Jonny and Ed are remarkably sanguine about their success.

Jonny: "It was a soft week, apparently."

Ed: "It was still brilliant."

Jonny: "I hadn't heard of the bands who were Number One the weeks before and after us."

Ed: "It really was great. We had two weeks over there and we were fêted and taken places and did *Saturday Night Live*. Americans love success, so if you've got a Number One record they really, really like you. The shows in New York and LA were just surreal."

There was a story that people were selling tickets on eBay for $5,000.

Ed: "I don't believe it. It was probably the record company."

Jonny: "Thom's been for sale on eBay, so..."

Ed: "Travis had been through New York the week before and I'm sure the same sort of thing happened to them."

Jonny: "Of course, Number One means no-one's heard it, they've just bought it."

Ed: "I tell you what's funny, with 'Optimistic' we've had our biggest radio hit over there since 'Creep'. Music sounds different in America, especially on the radio because of the compression. Something happens to 'Optimistic' when you put it through the radio compression on those FM stations over there and suddenly it sounds like an American rock song."

"AS BRITS, WE'RE VERY CRITICAL AND WE HAVE THIS LOVE OF PEOPLE FUCKING UP. WE DO, IT'S TRUE..." – ED O'BRIEN

NOVEMBER 2000-JANUARY 2001

Returning to Britain, Radiohead immediately retreated to the studio to finish work on the follow-up to 'Kid A'.

Jonny: "We are just sequencing and planning the order of tracks for it at the moment."

Ed: "This is another crucial stage."

Jonny: "We're just trying to decide how to do it this time around."

Ed: "The thing is you musn't get into second-guessing or worrying about how this one might be received. You've got to shut everything off and go with your instincts. I think most of the songs on there Radiohead fans will already have heard before, songs like 'Knives Out' will definitely be on there. We need another two or three weeks to live with it and knock it into shape. It's at such a crucial stage."

Is it going to be more conventional?

Ed: "We laugh at this. People say, 'Is your next record going to be more song-based?' and we're like, 'What were those ten tracks on the last record?' OK, 'Treefingers' might not be a classic verse-chorus-verse-chorus, but it's still a song."

Jonny: "Do you want some acoustic strum-a-longs? A 'Mull Of Kintyre'? That's sort of what people mean, isn't it? They basically want their hands held through 12 'Mull Of Kintyre's. That's what it feels like."

Ed: "The songs won't sound like they do live. 'Knives Out' is the most direct one on there, and sounds most like when we play it live..."

Jonny: "It's tempting just to say it will be full of pop songs."

Ed: "Anybody who knows the live material and has been on Napster, where you download all those live versions, will have a rough idea what it's going to sound like. There are similarities with what we've done in the past. We're in the studio at the moment working on new stuff that isn't even going to appear on this record. No, there won't be two records next year, although... well, there might be, maybe an EP or something. We just hate the hideous scrutiny that goes on with bands who release something every two years or so. We're desperately trying to find a way out of that. Anyway, the next album will be out in March."

Any other plans for next year?

Ed: "We're going to be touring America, because we haven't done that yet. There might even be some singles from the next record."

And videos?

Ed: "I think that's pushing it a bit far. You certainly won't get us performing in any."

And interviews?

Ed: "No, no, no. Hahaha."

Jonny: "It is rubbish when bands don't do interviews, but we do them and we do them really badly. It's like, why bother? I think we lack the media training to not be confused and contradictory, so who knows?"

And that's their final word on the subject. After an hour and a half of Y2K memories, Ed sits back in his seat and lights up a cigarette, while Jonny just looks relieved it's over. In a minute, they'll bid *NME* farewell and head off back to their studio.

After a year in which they've not only repositioned themselves as a radically experimental and commercially successful rock group, but also mapped out a whole new blueprint for marketing such an entity, they're determined not to rest on their laurels. Next year promises to be just as groundbreaking and controversial. And, who knows, this time they may even do interviews too. Who says they're control freaks?

GET YOUR CLICKS

NME.COM RECOMMENDS

www.ateaseweb.com *(the best fan site)*
www.radiohead.co.uk *(often bewildering official site)*